

# INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ARQUITECTONICS NETWORK: ARCHITECTURE, EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

## Title: Semiotic process of the office configuration

**Key words:** Configuration, concept, process, interaction, semiotic, syntagmatic, paradigmatic.

### Summary:

Our research focuses on the study of the relationship between object and space within a context of spatial configuration in relation to the service activity, and commonly known as the office. The "office" considered as a concept, is subject to a multiple interactions that connects the office space, the office-object and the activity or office-features. Based on the specificity of the "office" activity we wonder how the development of the activity takes place in a particular spatiality that can restrict an object to the scale of the operation or a configuration that includes the user. How does the office fit into a dynamic relationship between object and space?

In order to expose the mechanisms of this interactivity (Between object and space) that semiotics method would be a great contribution to identify the signs<sup>1</sup> and the symbolic dimensions as a result of changes in the society. To answer these questions we organized our thinking around two areas: 1- we explore the definition of office entity (object/space), as it passed in diachronic, paying particular attention to the changes in context and the symbolic features. 2-Second, the semiotic study that will be used to identify the office as an articulated system and will thereby proceed to the analysis of syntagmatic and paradigmatic forms and structures that characterize the different contexts of architectural production.

Ultimately, this work would in a sense validate (If we may say so), the hypothesis that the evolution of cognitive development of the office space is in relation with the dynamics of the evolving technology. While aiming to feasibility and maximum profitability, it reduces labor time, limits the use of space, and makes the job done remotely.

However, we will focus on the evolutionary process of the office. The sustained office configuration (whatever it is) cannot be conceived disregarding the accumulation "of successive states of the office" or without selection, according to the law of renewal / replaces the unnecessary element that allows the office to continue exist. It is then possible to understand that as an object, the office considered as based on responding to functional need in the first place; the process of its evolution will be an answer to a specific cultural code of a specified period. Understanding by analyzing phases and their ways of articulation allows us to read the softness - of the boundary between furniture (Desk) as configuration where the activity takes place and the building (the office space) designed for the same purpose while having a different configuration.

This research has attempted to highlight how sustainability evidenced by this office since ancient times reflects the quest of a man's "tool" each adapted to new contexts, that helps achieve optimal management of both physical and, virtual, immeasurable products data exchange.

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<sup>1</sup> Peirce writes: "I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the later is thereby mediately determined by the former". 1977.

## **Introduction:**

The office commonly known as a room, set of rooms, or building used for commercial, professional, or bureaucratic work is in continuously development. According to Duffy cave: *“It is only comparatively recently that we have come to associate the word “Office” with a physical location or building type. The foreign office and the holy office represent tasks, places of authority, greater than the man who perform that office, and which may or may not require some sort of physical framework for their function. (Planning Office space-2000)*

The desk office, which introduced as a furniture to help organizing the society has developed on a way that include now the building but still have the meaning of service, and still needs the tree pillars: someone to work, someone to ask for work and the action of work. The mutation of the offices seems not affecting this relation between the three elements but on the way to organize this relation. For that, we consider during this research the office as a concept that develop into a multiple configuration.

The "office" is subject to a multiple interactions that connects the office-object, the office space and the activity or services. Based on the specificity of the activity we looked at how the development of the activity affects the configuration of the office. How does the office fit into a dynamic relationship between object and space?

The office is considered during this research as a “concept” and can be identified as (1) the desk-office as a furniture (where to work) and in this case it is an “object” and (2) the office-space, the flat, the building that contains one or more than one desk-office, the “space”.

### ***Does the office change (develop)?***

The office understood as an object, which fulfills a functional need, in its first signification, that the evolution process is a response to a specific period in relation to a social and/or cultural dimension. We can easily read the fragile boundary between furniture configuration as the object where the activity takes place and the building space, designed for the same purpose while having a different configuration. The assumption that the evolution of the office is mainly a cognitive evolution, which driven by the dynamics of the development of technology, while aiming for a maximum profitability, reduced labor time, eliminates the space occupancy and realizes remote

working. The process takes place in a context related to the ability of the furniture item and organization to ensure the smooth running of the business, thus mainly a question of working scale.

Our idea is to understand if only the technology evolution affect the configuration of the office-design, or there are some others dimensions: social, cultural, that affect these configurations.

Indeed, we all had, at one time or another, an office where to work, to perform searches, to implement projects, to obtain information or services. The office today is changing, considered not only the place where we work, but also a social space where we meet friends and develop business relationships. It is the place where we spend a big part of our personal and social life.

How does the office start as a place to organize a society and become thru the years a multiple area, offices with different configurations to answer the society mutation and that become in some cases a virtual space without changing his official mission?

The evolution of the office space during the last century commonly admitted to be in correlation with the technology development. *“The office as we know it as an invention, and like any other invention, it can be reinvented. By designing our offices with imagination and grounding the design in an understanding of the ecology of work and worker, we can do better than create places that do not harm.” (Franklin Becker-2004)*

The use of semiotics<sup>2</sup> method<sup>i</sup> as a way to identify and analyze the different configuration of the office seems interesting in order to expose the mechanisms of interactivity between the office-desk as an object and the office space as a room or flat. In this research, we consider architecture as a configuration system in relation with the dual space-time necessary for the conduct of various activities relating to the existence of human beings. As here an architectural object, in this case the “office”, will be understood as phenomenological reading that goes beyond the formal and the material aspect of the object. To determine the production of the architectural object, would it be useful to define the different levels of the concept "office", and their ways of articulation. The office as a sign<sup>3</sup>, understood in a symbolic dimensions because of the society changes.

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<sup>2</sup> Semiotics offers an approach for researching and analyzing systems of meaning that encompass both social and organizational cultures.

<sup>3</sup> Peirce writes: “I define a sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former”. 1977.

For that, we organize our thinking around two areas: 1- we explore the *definition of office entity* (object/space), paying particular attention to the changes in context and the symbolic features. 2- Second, the semiotic study that will be used to identify the office as an articulated system and will thereby proceed to the analysis forms and structures that characterize the different contexts of architectural production.

Following a semiotic theory, this paper presents a cases study from offices and demonstrates that the sustainability of the Concept “office” is due to the same function, the only change in design and management of the objet (furniture) or space is the impact of the social and cultural identity. This study can show how semiotic research can let us distinguish between the evolution of the concept and his sustainability.

During this research, will start to define the office as showing on the Online Dictionary Cambridge: office<sup>4</sup> noun, Workplace, (1) Room or part of a building in which people work, especially sitting at tables with computers, phones, etc., usually as a part of a business or other organization. (2) Part of a company (3) A place where you can go to ask advice from or receive treatment from a doctor or dentist. An office is generally a room or other area where administrative work is done, but may also denote a position within an organization with specific duties attached to it. It is an architectural and design space, whether it is a small office with one desk for one person or more desk and a group of persons. It can run from a desk in a corner to a building with multiple floors for one company.

The office has a typical uses, which refer to a conventional offices activities and summarized in reading, writing, archives and for the last years computers work. The office workspace as a configuration and a support for the office activity change: Starting from a desk to room to an open space and more spaces to support such as the lounges and meeting rooms. The workspace arrangement depend on the management, the functions and the culture of the specific companies.

According to John Collin: *“The difficulties of defining the office as a building type are matched only by the case with which we can identify the function of an office. The concept of an office can be seen as one of the most content threads in any culture, for systems of government and*

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<sup>4</sup> Office (noun), workplace. Source: <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/office>

*manufacture may change beyond recognition, but in any organization human being which extends beyond the smallest group, the word office, and the idea it represents emerge as stable component of language”.*

First of Starting from the idea that the “office” is a cultural fact in itself. As such, the “Office” is part of the development of societies since the invention of writing as a form of communication and, most likely, recording memory using indestructible support. The activities of [Office], so they seem endless, essentially present as property management means a company that developed writing, producing, intercommunication which, in turn, developed, and continues to develop "cognitive accounting", direction of production, between transmitter and receiver. This one, being used in the service of trade, commerce has, in turn, bureaucratic activity on the one hand, and the spatial and architectural creation of the "office, a marked production system. The "office" never cease to reproduce (or produce) according to the requirements of society. A comprehensive look at the history of the [office] shows that its basic functions are sustainable, although apparently the footprint of different forms in wills periods and dominant modes of expression and that they develop as intercom means, services and tools adapted to the context, in particular, and human culture in general.

The aim of this work is not to go throw the history of the office, but more than that. The semiotic process allows us to identify the components of the object and space, so we can observe both their specificities, their organizations and their meanings to measure their impacts on the activity interaction and understand in what extent they are adapted to persist or unsuitable for change. We will have to limit this researches to few examples: (1) the scribes, as the first configuration of the office (2) the palace offices (3) the first office building and (4) the office as a virtual configuration.

**The scribes**<sup>5</sup> considered during this research as the nucleus of the office. Indeed, we can recognise that the work is mainly copying books, including sacred texts, or secretarial and administrative duties, such as taking of dictation and the keeping of business, judicial and, historical records for kings, nobles, temples, and cities in other term all the administrative and economic activities were documented by them. They have an important social rank and also considered part of the royal court, and did not have to pay taxes. The scribe “office” is limited to the outline of the body and the extension of his arms.



*Figure 1 : Egyptian scribe with papyrus scroll. On the 9<sup>th</sup> century*

We can recognize in this photo: (a) the sitting position of the worker in front of the desk-office (different from the scribe position) (b) the desk (furniture) as a support for the writing, illustration work and storage of document and (c) the service of writing, reading.

The three pillars of the office configuration is mainly a corner in a room and the office work assumed according to the specific period and in answer to the society. Thru the interaction of these tree pillars; we can recognize that the office has conserved the relation between work, workers and the working support or office desk. At this stage, we can say that only the configuration of the objet office change, from the outline body to a corner space.



*Figure 2 : St Matthew, on the 9<sup>th</sup> century, at the office working*

During the **classical antiquity**, the Offices are part of a palace complex or a large temple. During the High Middle ages, the place to write letter and copy document called chancery. The office has existed as an administrative adjunct to the centralized power of the state, as an example: The Palazzo Uffizi in Florence of the Medici.



*Figure 3 : Judge of Probate Edmund W. Bazille in his office in the courthouse, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1900<sup>ii</sup>.*

<sup>5</sup> A **scribe** is a person who writes books or documents by hand in hieroglyphics, cuniform or other scripts and may help keep track of records.

The first commercial offices appeared in the northern industrial cities of the United States in the late nineteenth Century. With the invention of the telegraph and telephone, offices could be situated away from the home or factory and control could be retained over production and distribution to distant markets.

With the growth and the complex organizations in the **18<sup>th</sup> century**, the first purpose-built office spaces were constructed. As the Industrial Revolution intensified in the 18th and 19th centuries, the industries of banking, rail, insurance, retail, petroleum, and telegraphy grew, and a large number of clerks were needed, and as a result more office space was required to house these activities. The development of new construction techniques such as the use of iron frame and the metal frame allowed William Baron Jenney, construction in 1879, in Chicago, the first building with independent floors exterior walls, non-bearing walls being referred to hereinafter as curtain walls. With the advent of the elevator, it becomes possible to build multi-story buildings, each floor has easy access, and the highest floors seen as a sign of power and thus give themselves a symbolic dimension. It is clear that depending on the scale of activity, the office will be designed. The emergence of the office as a building from the 19<sup>th</sup> century is an answer to the grow of the offices numbers and the various organization of the working space and the way to manage the work. This expansion on the scale of building gain on area and floors numbers, on offices and desks.

In 1906, in Vienna, Otto Wagner with the “Larkin Building- 1896<sup>iii</sup>” in Buffalo and Frank Lloyd Wright, with the “Johnson Wax Building” in Racine in 1939, developed new office concepts with an integrated workstation. The design of the office building and the office furniture fitted into the same design. This step of the analysis allows us to say that the office provides its service function; it allows the progress of the work activity. The material aspect refer to a specific culture of the time focusing generally on the profitability and efficiency of the service.





*Figure 4: the larkin Building*



*Figure 5: Work room at the Larkin Building*

Until the mid-20th century, the large room was the space dedicated to work with others. Trying to follow the economic growing, the office open plan was the best solution to ensure the maximum of work with the control and the notoriety of the staff. Then it became apparent that an efficient office required discretion in the control of privacy, and gradually the cubicle system evolved. The main idea was to consider employees' physical and psychological needs and to streamline workflow.

New technologies such as electric lighting, the typewriter and the use of calculating machines allowed large amounts of information to be accumulated and processed faster and more efficiently than before. The concentration of wealth in the new corporations required an ever-greater proportion of an increasingly literate population to work in the “white collar factories”.

In Chicago, the mid-western hub of the American rail network, technologies such as the steel frame and elevator enabled office buildings to be constructed higher and higher. The offices rise in a building with multiple roofs that make possible to generate maximum income from the site. These were the first speculative office buildings and generally followed the traditional layout of separate rooms opening into corridors. This idea of –Profit- from the site push the construction to the sky by the early twentieth century. At about the same time, the German planners at Quickborner Team proved that the open office function are quite differently, by inventing the office landscape. With



substantial consequences. The idea was to have an open space with a workflow and break with the rigid relation between employers and make easier the internal communications needs.

We say, finally, that the offices responded to the demands of the industrial revolution. The mechanization of production processes and office tasks aimed to increase productivity, to better control the speed of information transmission and shipment and receipt. The global environment is undergoing profound changes accommodated with the new forms of competition, movements of releases and innovations.

It is in this context that new forms of companies with their new strategies based on flexibility, mobility and innovation in the services to which traditional space organizations. The evolution of the global economic environment created many new desktop configurations based on the development conditions, too, mainly on flexibility, immediacy, comfort and technology. The office today are different, it is a virtual area that can be moved from place to place, and this add a concept of flexibility which is required due to the continues growing of the work and the continuous need to work more.

### ***Conclusion:***

According to this research, it is credible to conclude that the office is not just a piece of furniture or building, a place in which intellectual work activity. There is also a secondary core of man's life, which integrates social dimensions, cultural and psychological.

Ultimately, this work would in a sense validate (If we may say so), the hypothesis that the evolution of cognitive development of the office space is in relation with the dynamics of the evolving technology. While aiming to feasibility and maximum profitability, it reduces labor time, limits the use of space, and makes the job done remotely.

However, we will focus on the evolutionary process of the office. The sustained office configuration (whatever it is) cannot be conceived disregarding the accumulation "of successive states of the office" or without selection, according to the law of renewal / replaces the unnecessary element that allows the office to continue exist. It is then possible to understand that as an object, the office considered based on responding to functional need in the first place; the process of its evolution will be an answer to a specific cultural code of a specified period. Understanding by

analyzing phases and their ways of articulation allows us to read the softness - of the boundary between furniture (Desk) as configuration where the activity takes place and the building (the office space) designed for the same purpose while having a different configuration.

This study highlighted the sustainability of the office as a concept, which under the analyzing effects of different configurations shows the evolution process. Thanks to the examples we can say that the office as an architectural space evaluate according to the technology changing but also it has also a cultural and social aspect. Our study has underlined the “multidimensionality” of the office as an architectural space.

This research has attempted to highlight how sustainability evidenced by this office since ancient times reflects the quest of a man's "tool" each adapted to new contexts, that helps achieve optimal management of both physical and, virtual, immeasurable products data exchange.

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